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ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic research methods, semistructured interviews were conducted with three women involved with a gay/lesbian/bisexual student organization. All three individuals were sophomores at an urban university in a large metropolitan area. The students discussed the fluid nature of the definitions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual, noting that they were often overlapping and not as important in detail as in concept. The students noted that they functioned in multiple communities, and that issues of gender were more substantial than issues of sexual orientation. They also commented that campus communities based on sexual orientation usually centered around gay men. The expectations of campus life that the students held before entering college were limited: they wanted to be more "out" and they wanted to find more people like themselves than they found in high school. What they discovered in college, or perhaps created, was a sense of community and family, using their experiences as "outsiders" in the dominant culture to become "insiders" in a community based on sexual orientation and social stigmatization. (Contains 10 references.) (MDM)

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"Did you think I was going to be riding a Harley or something?"

Lesbian and Bisexual Student Leaders' Experiences of College Communities

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Patrick Dilley

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I don't think we have a large lesbian community. -- Charlie

How do I describe myself?... 'Gay, bi, you know.' -- Michelle

I just love being with gay men. -- Sam

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These statements come from three women attending college, three different voices, yet each statement could have come from any one of the three. Their voices, their experiences, like those of most homosexual or bisexual women, have not been heard. What is college life like for this group of students? How do these women define their sexuality, their identities? In their lives, what are the differences between the concepts of *straight*, *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual*? What can college administrators, educators, and student service personnel as learn from these women

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about their lives and their development, and, most importantly, how can we use that knowledge to better our teaching and service to these students? In this on-going study I seek answers to those questions, and begin what will hopefully be an on-going dialogue about, and with, lesbian student leaders at one U.S. university.

Previous Research on Gays and Lesbians in College

In contrast to research conducted on the lives and development of college students and homosexual people in general, very little has been produced about gay, lesbian or bisexual college students. In terms of homosexual identity developmental theory, most researchers have produced works that address gay and lesbian youth more generally, rather than specifically on changes occurring during college. What is known or theorized about gay male students' identity development and experience is not extensive, but the research and theories do exist. Corresponding sources for lesbian college students are less readily evident. .

Researchers have also begun to demonstrate aspects of community, both within the gay and lesbian population and within college student populations. Rhoads (1994) posits a theory of gay male student contraculture, a set of socialized communities that reflect differing values, interests and ideologies of the gay students. D'Augelli and Garnets (1995) demonstrate both the commonalties of and the differences between gay male and lesbian communities in general, although not in higher educational settings. Faderman (1991) traces a modern history of American lesbian communities, including in women's colleges in the early Twentieth Century. Horowitz (1987), in a similar historical perspective of college students, posits a theory of distinct, multiple and coexistent undergraduate communities. What is missing is an idea of how lesbian college students are a part of, or apart from, college communities. From this silence on lesbian college students spring the research questions of this project.

PROJECT DESIGN: DISCOVERING THE EXPERIENCES OF GAY, LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL COLLEGE WOMEN

I conceptualized this project through my own beliefs as a gay man and a student of higher education grounded in emancipatory critical theory; I believe that by observing and listening to students (particularly those previously who have not been heard), we can obtain information that we might never even know to ask about. We can then analyze what we learn, and create ideas and theories for understanding, and improving, our educational systems, the lives of our students, and society. To begin this process, this study explores the multiple identities and communities experienced by female student leaders who self-identify as lesbian, bisexual, and/or gay. To do this, I present an analysis of students' comments to three questions:

- What do lesbian/bisexual college student leaders define as communities on their campus?
- How do lesbian/female bisexual college student leaders interact with or within those communities?
- How do their prior expectations of being lesbian/female bisexual in college relate to the realities they experience?

To obtain first-hand answers, I employ ethnographic research methods, specifically hour-long interviews with women involved with a gay/lesbian/ bisexual student organization. Three women were involved in the initial sets of interviews, but a fourth has joined during the past year and a half that I have worked on this project. The interviews are semi-structured dialogues about what communities the students perceive and their experiences within those communities. Open-ended questions comprise the interview protocol, and the answers to those questions often generate new lines of questioning that deviate from the protocol.

All three subjects were sophomores at an urban university in a large metropolitan area at the time we began these conversations (the fourth is a graduate student). For this study, I will concentrate only upon the interview data from the first part of the study, and only upon the undergraduates. The participants are volunteers I solicited for this project, and had access, prior to the interview, to an informed consent statement that included the research questions and a guarantee of anonymity. Two of the women are age 18; one is 19. Each one is affiliated with the university's gay/lesbian/ bisexual student organization, either in an elected or appointed leadership position. *Charlie* is a Mexican-American "woman-centered bisexual," as is the office coordinator of the university's gay, lesbian and bisexual student organization. *Michelle* is "an Asian-American gay woman" who serves as the coordinator of the organization's bisexual rap group. And *Sam* is an African-American who is director of the university's women's student organization, and also a member of the g/l/b association's board of directors; in her own words, Sam is "not a typical lesbian; I'm a gay man trapped in a lesbian's body." As their interviews point out, however, each prefers or uses the term *gay* in conversational self-reference.

I present more information about the students and the data from the interviews in the full text of the original study (which is available via email at my address above). Using the students' impressions of the subcultures they encounter in college settings, I offer here the **Discussion** section of that paper, an analysis of their perceived communities, including the borders and boundaries of campus, gender, and sexual orientation. I center my analysis around my perception of the prevailing themes of the women's experiences and perceptions. Finally, in the **Conclusion**, I offer answers to the three project questions.

DISCUSSION: INFERENCES AND QUESTIONS

The students I talked with represent a very specific population: they were out in high

school, they all grew up in a major metropolitan area, and at a relatively early age they reached a comfort level with their sexuality and sexual orientation that allowed them to assume a leadership role within their community and on their campus. As with any project based on qualitative methods and including such a small number of very specific subjects, generalizations from the data must be limited to inferences. Those inferences are mine, posited within the context of the existing literature and the validity of the experiences the students told; I offer them with the caveat that the results reflect one analysis of one set of responses from one group of subjects at one institution. Several general trends are apparent, though, and raise several questions for consideration and further research.

Definitions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual are fluid, overlapping, and not as important in detail as in concept. Jenness' (1992) and Brown's (1995) critique of the inability of those terms to reflect the complexity of sexuality and sexual orientation is quite valid: in some ways, I find it very difficult to situate this study's findings in a context that is validly representative and also generalizable. Sam feels she is a gay man trapped in a lesbian's body; Charlie feels she is validly a bisexual, but that she will probably become (or choose to become) a lesbian; Michelle is a bisexual woman with a preference for women. The problem of the definitions seems to be more one for researchers and theorists and not for students, however. The students use the term *gay* most generally, but also use *queer* (sometimes in a more political context, sometimes more inclusively), *lesbian* (often in a more specific, usually non-campus social, context), and *bisexual* (when discussing specific sexuality or experiences). It is ultimately the designation of difference due to sexual orientation that defines, and unites, these students on campus, regardless of particular sexual objects, actions, or gender: As Michelle said, "*Gay* and *lesbian*? Oh, they're the same."

Multiple communities exist for the students. Consistent with previous research findings, the women identified many communities, or cultures, in which they interact. The definitions of those communities are as fluid as the definitions of the students' identities: straight, ethnic, sexual-orientation identified, gender, and on- and off-campus distinctions of those communities. In naming their campus community based on sexual-orientation identification, *gay* is what the term these students give, despite the wordier inclusiveness of the name of the organization the students represent. This definition, although it might appropriate a word commonly associated with homosexual men, includes lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders.

Issues of gender are more substantial than issues of sexual orientation. Sam summarized it when she said she was a woman first, before an African-American or a lesbian. Michelle and Charlie concur, each offering views that the experiences of women are different from those of men, even gay men. Despite this, the women identify very heavily with gay men, and even feel discomfort and disdain for women they view as "stereotype heterosexual" or "skirt-girls." How this affects their interactions with other women, and development of their gender-identity, is an intriguing question, especially since they indicated that they interacted primarily with gay men.

Ethnic minority identity does not appear related to sexual-orientation identity. Each woman is a member of an ethnic minority in the United States, and each offers evidence that her ethnic minority status is important but distinctly different from her sexual orientation. When the two are in conflict, such as when Charlie attends parties thrown by the Latino business students, the ethnic identity is seen as compromising the sexual-orientation identity.

The degree to which ethnic identity is important differed among the students. To Sam it is very important, more than her sexual orientation; to Michelle it is not as important, and an area she expresses a need to develop further for herself. Previous researchers (i.e., Espin, 1987; Chan,

1989; Loiacano, 1989) highlight questions of choice between these identities, either as competing or at least co-existing for the subjects. Michelle's and Charlie's statements imply that their sexual identity dominates their sense of self; this could be due to their extensive involvement in the student organization at a time of immense personal growth in general. How this factor of their self-identity might change or grow over time, and in relation to their sexual-orientation aspect of their identity, is an important area for future investigation.

Campus communities based on sexual orientation are centered around gay men. All of the students indicates that the students with whom they spend the most time with on campus are gay men. Indeed, their campus sexual-orientation identified community is based around the members of the student organization, and the majority of those members are gay males. None of the women seem displeased with the fact that they spend their campus free time with the men, although each expresses a desire to have more gay, lesbian or bisexual women join the organization and the community. Off-campus communities remain, for Charlie and Sam, centered around the gay men from campus, although Michelle prefers to socialize with lesbian women who are not a part of campus.

CONCLUSION

To return to the three questions that guided this project, I see some clear answers that reflect life for college leaders who also happen to be lesbian, bisexual or gay women. Their campus gay community centers primarily around the members of the gay student organization, primarily gay males. The definition of that community, however, is inclusive of "otherness" and marginality based on the dominant society's view of sexual-orientation identity and difference. As Michelle stated, "It's good to have your labels... but I see it as all encompassing, as *gay*."

Sexual-orientation-identified women interact with multiple campus and off-campus

communities in a variety of ways. They challenge the assumptions of the straight world, both those stated, as Michelle did in class, and those conveyed in the absence of valid images and roles of themselves, as Charlie expressed in conversations with other students. These women try to provide role models, as members of their student organization for other sexual-orientation identified students and as leaders on campus. And, when necessary, when their physical and emotional safety is at risk, they avoid such challenges and roles .

The expectations of college life that they held before reaching campus were limited: they wanted to be "more out," and they wanted to find more people like themselves than they found in high school. What they discovered, or perhaps helped create, is a sense of community and family. They used their experiences as "outsiders" in the dominant culture, to borrow Horowitz's terms, to become "insiders" in a community based on sexual orientation and social stigmatization.

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